

# A Qualitative Study on the Identity Construction of Pre-service English Teachers

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## Abstract

*This study explores pre-service English teachers' identity construction via Wenger's CoP model. Four postgraduate students with diverse undergraduate majors and over three months of teaching internship were interviewed. Findings reveal that identity is shaped by engagement in teaching (prior experiences, courses, internships) and imagining alternatives (good teacher criteria, career visions). Participants note theory-practice conflicts, with internships revealing gaps between ideals and exam-focused realities. Their "good teacher" concepts stress competence and ethics. The study highlights the need for integrated theory-practice training and further research on dynamic identity transition.*



**Keywords**—Community of Practice, Identity construction, Pre-service teachers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher identity construction has long been a focal point in educational research, as it shapes not only educators' professional commitment but also their instructional practices (Trent, 2010). For pre-service English teachers, this process is particularly complex, involving the negotiation of roles between student and educator, the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical experience, and the alignment of personal values with educational contexts (Vallente & Mael, 2020).

Within the framework of Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice (CoP) theory, identity is constructed through dynamic interactions in social communities, where engagement, imagination, and alignment foster a sense of belonging. This theory provides a valuable lens to explore how pre-service teachers develop their professional identities amid the transition from academic settings to classroom practice. However, existing studies have predominantly focused on in-service teachers, leaving gaps in understanding the unique challenges faced by pre-service English teachers—such as reconciling pedagogical ideals with exam-oriented

realities and adapting to diverse student needs (Wang, 2020).

Based on these, the research aims to investigate the following two questions within the Wenger's theoretical framework discussed in this section:

- (1) What are the factors affecting the identity construction of pre-service English teachers?
- (2) What are the pre-service English teachers' experiences of teacher identity construction.

## II. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Patton (1990) once pointed out that the selection of research participants according to the purpose of research can provide the largest amount of information for research questions. This study selected 4 participants who are all second-grade postgraduate students. The four participants were selected for three reasons: Firstly, they are all full-time postgraduate students that we can easily connect with them. Secondly, they have interned in junior or senior high school for at least 3 months, which suits this study well. Thirdly, they have different majors when they were

undergraduate, which maybe an important factor influencing their identity construction.

### III. METHOD

The interview is a method for the study to obtain comprehensive information about research participants. Based on the analysis of interviews, the interviewer can know the interviewees' psychological activities and their teaching behaviors. And then the factors affecting their identity construction can be explored. The interviewees' answers were recorded on tape with their consents. In order to have a data file, the tape-recordings are transcribed.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was a gradually evolving process in which the dataset, theoretical framework, coded categories and research questions were repeatedly evaluated, re-evaluated and reformulated. The data was reviewed until themes and patterns that potentially answered the research questions emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Based on Wenger's CoP model, after coding and re-coding the interviews, the study adopts two modes of belonging—Engagement with learning to teach and Imaging alternatives, which are as crucial elements in shaping one's identity.

### V. FINDINGS

#### 5.1 Engagement with learning to teach

Wenger (1998) suggests that engagement in practice involves investing in what is being done and in relationships with other members of the community. With adopting this theoretical framework and analyzing the interviews, the study finds that there are mainly three factors affecting the pre-service teachers' identity construction in this category, including previous experiences (Previous educational experiences as well as previous part-time or internship experiences), courses learnt during the postgraduate study along with the current internship experiences.

##### 5.1.1 Previous experiences

###### (1) Previous educational experiences.

The four interviewees have different majors when they are undergraduate, during the interview, they point out that the choice of major at the end of high school has a great impact on the choice of career in life. The following extract from one interviewee is representative:

For my undergraduate study, I wasn't a normal education major but studied within the broader

English discipline. Now I'm pursuing a Master of Education in English Teaching in our university. I didn't systematically study English teaching courses during my undergraduate years. (Interviewee A)

Interviewee A didn't major in normal education during her undergraduate period, but she wants to pursue a Master of Education in English Teaching, to systematically learn English teaching courses.

###### (2) Previous part-time or internship experiences

Three interviewees say their previous part-time or internship experiences play a positive role in identity construction while one says it's less helpful. For example,

After graduating from university, I worked as a full-time teacher in an educational institution for a year. Except for lesson planning, there was little pressure, but I felt it didn't significantly improve my teaching abilities. Their expected teaching focused solely on score improvement—completely different from the core competencies and English learning activity concepts taught in university. Therefore, apart from reinforcing English knowledge points daily, the experience did little to enhance basic teaching skills or professional capabilities. (Interviewee D)

This interviewee thinks that her part-time job experience does not help much to improve her basic teaching skills and teaching abilities.

##### 5.1.2 Courses learnt during the postgraduate study.

The four participants all major in English Teaching during the postgraduate study. After learning the courses, one interviewee thinks that some courses are helpful in becoming an English teacher such as Test and Assessment courses and UbD (Understanding by Design).

Interviewee B : I think Ms. Li's Test and Assessment course was helpful. She asked us to share teaching designs and guided us on revisions. At the end of the course, we designed cloze tests, which was an interesting activity—swapping roles with teachers. As students, we used to find teachers' difficult questions frustrating, but as teachers, we aimed to challenge students while covering key knowledge points. Mr. Wu's course on UbD was particularly useful for lesson planning.

Another interviewee feels the conflict between theory and practice. when she is in a real classroom, she needs to make adjustments to the class, and she feels there are many special situations which need more practical experience. The interviewee's description is exemplified in the following excerpt:

Interviewee D : In the university, we practiced teaching without real students (mock teaching) and

lesson planning. Although we had clear theoretical frameworks for lesson structures, real classrooms required improvisation. Student dynamics varied—some high-achieving classes were inactive, while others with lower scores were lively. Such special cases demanded more practical experience than theory could provide.

While there's another interviewee figures out that what she has learnt is like a coin having two sides which can both be helpful and be obstructive.

Interviewee A : It's a conflict between theory and practice, ideal and reality. Theories like "Big Ideas" do help—for example, designing unit-based teaching on themes like "Space Exploration," expanding from vocabulary to texts and back. But conflicts arise because classroom theories assume students master all content, while real teaching must prioritize exam-oriented needs. When teaching Lin Qiaozhi, we aimed to emphasize her virtues, but students preferred traditional, exam-focused methods. This reflects a clash between ideal core competencies (language, cultural awareness, etc.) and practical exam priorities.

### 5.1.3 Current internship experiences.

Even though the four interviewees are different from their current internship experiences, they all consider the conflict between the theoretical knowledge and practice. Besides, an interviewee has enhanced her reflection ability through the internship. This could be illustrated by the extract from A :

Teaching my first listening-speaking class was unforgettable. Despite theoretical knowledge, designing and delivering the lesson revealed practical challenges—like time management. A 40-minute class felt much shorter than expected, requiring content cuts. I overestimated students' comprehension of listening materials, which needed extra repetitions. Feedback from supervising teachers was invaluable, and the friendly office culture enhanced my experience. (Interviewee A )

From the above fragment, we can see that the interviewee A has a good relationship with her colleagues and she can learn more from the practice.

## 5. 2 Imaging alternatives

The participants are found to employ imagination in the process of identity construction. According to the research, there are mainly four aspects: participants' views on the criteria of "a good teacher", the reasons for the criteria of "a good teacher", imagination of being what kind of teacher, and thoughts of giving up being a teacher.

### 5.2.1 Views on the criteria of "a good teacher"

Broadly speaking, the four interviewees think that "a good teacher" should have professional competence such as teaching ability, problem solving ability; have moral qualities like emphasis on teacher ethics; form personal styles; keep learning and apply in practice. The following extracts represent their views:

Interviewee B: First, responsibility: managing student-parent relationships and committing to students. Second, patience: treating all students equally, though I struggle with patience during disciplinary issues. Third, handling emergencies: observing experienced teachers' calm problem-solving. Lastly, teaching competence: postgraduate courses on instructional design significantly aided this.

Interviewee D : I think an important quality for good teachers is the ability to ground theoretical knowledge in practice. We need to apply what we've learned by adapting it to real-world contexts. This involves not only understanding students as much as possible and grasping exam trends, but also continuously updating our teaching skills and approaches. That's the standard I aspire to achieve to become a competent teacher.

The above fragments show that the interviewee B thinks "a good teacher" should be responsible and patient. Besides, he or she can cope with something emergency. What's more, interviewee D stresses that the pedagogical ability is the most needed.

### 5.2.2 Reasons for the criteria of "a good teacher"

There are various reasons for the criteria of "a good teacher", but to conclude the interview, the formation of the criteria mainly come from their internships, own experience as a student and theoretical knowledge.

The following fragment shows that the interviewee A has such criteria of "a good teacher" mainly because she learns them from the textbooks and her own internship.

The standards stem from both theory and practice. Theoretical knowledge—like educational theories in English Pedagogy—laid the foundation, while practical experiences (past teachers and current supervisors) shaped real-world understanding. Ethical conduct, equal treatment, and student-centered thinking emerged from this blend. ( Interviewee A)

### 5.2.3 Imagination of being what kind of teacher

Interviewees have different opinions on imagination of being what kind of teacher in the future. Their views are extracted as follows:

Interviewee A: I aspire to be a good teacher, though practical challenges may alter this. I intend to prioritize students' academic performance and learning capabilities, but career realities might dampen initial enthusiasm. Despite uncertainties, I strive to maintain passion—as the saying goes, "May love never fade."

Interviewee C: After entering a public school, I will integrate the theoretical knowledge with teaching practice, continuously refine my teaching methods, and improve instructional designs. Meanwhile, I plan to engage in academic educational research, publish papers, and undertake appropriate research projects. In daily studies, I will enhance learning efficiency, set clear goals, and avoid imposing excessive pressure on students or myself. I am confident to become a qualified English teacher.

Interviewee A wants to be a strict teacher and try her best to become a good teacher in her mind. Interviewee C feels like being an educator-type teacher so that neither the students nor herself should be too stressed out.

#### 5.2.4 Thoughts of giving up being a teacher

Three interviewees sometimes want to give up being a teacher but would stick to it. However, one interviewer doesn't have the thoughts of not becoming a teacher at all:

Due to heavy workloads in public schools—grading papers, preparing teaching competitions, and managing non-teaching tasks (e.g., parent communication, dormitory checks for homeroom teachers). The stress of balancing theory-practice gaps and academic pressures occasionally makes me question the career. However, focusing solely on teaching (non-homeroom) alleviates these concerns. (Interviewee C)

We can note that the interviewee C sometimes has the thoughts of giving up being a teacher because she feels stressed and she finds that she is busy in many things.

However, interviewee B doesn't have the thoughts of not being a teacher, and she still has a certain amount of anticipation for being a teacher. We can see from the following extract:

Though career burnout is inevitable, self-adjustment is key. With limited teaching experience during the internship, I still feel fresh and optimistic about the profession. (Interviewee B)

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study aims to discuss the pre-service teachers' identity construction, and tries to find out (1) What are the factors affecting the identity construction of pre-service English

teachers? (2) What are the pre-service English teachers' experiences of teacher identity construction? Through the research, for the engagement with learning to teach, we can find that the factors affecting the construction of teachers' identity are complex. They are influenced by internal and external factors such as the family, society and the individual. This aligns with Trent (2010), who argues that teacher identity is shaped by dynamic interactions between personal histories and professional contexts, highlighting the role of practical engagement in identity formation.

In addition, in the process of identity construction, the pre-service teachers' subjective initiatives are fully reflected. One will stick to be a teacher if he or she has a strong personal conviction. As to the imaging alternatives, pre-service teachers' identity as a teacher is changing: the majority of them are hesitant about whether they would be committed to becoming a teacher in the future. Howie et al. (2007) note that pre-service teachers' identity formation involves negotiating multiple role expectations.

Overall, this study confirms that pre-service English teachers' identity construction is a socially situated process (Wenger, 1998), influenced by both structural factors (e.g., teacher education programs) and subjective initiative (e.g., reflective practice). As Wang (2020) observes in related research on pre-service teachers, sustained support for bridging theory and practice is crucial for fostering stable professional identities.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS

Identity is constructed in practice and context. In order to promote pre-service English language teachers' enthusiasm for education and positive identity construction, based on the findings of the study, the study has the following implications:

Firstly, provide more internship opportunities. There is a need to provide more internship opportunities for pre-service teachers, to strengthen the integration of theory and practice in pre-service education duration, and to reduce the gap between theory and practice during pre-service teachers' internships

Secondly, give subjective initiatives into full play. Educational practice serves as a critical transitional phase for pre-service teachers as they move from their pre-service training to actual teaching positions. The degree of their satisfaction with their educational practice directly influences their understanding of and identification with the teaching profession (Ren Yongcan et al., 2023). Pre-service teachers need to enhance their subjective initiatives, take the initiative to explore and learn, enrich their experience and knowledge in the field of educational

practice, enhance their self-reflective ability, and continue to promote the transformation of the "real self" into the "ideal self".

Thirdly, further research. In the research, the pre-service teachers' identity construction is changing with different thoughts, so it's necessary to focus on the dynamic process of identity construction, conduct longitudinal studies to track the identity changes of pre-service teachers from enrollment to post-employment, and conduct in-depth analysis of the influencing factors at each stage. In addition, exploring how to utilize modern educational technologies, such as online teaching platforms and virtual simulation teaching, to facilitate the identity construction of pre-service teachers is also a direction worthy of attention.

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